

The Role of English in the 21st Century

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The world is in various stages of social, economic, and demographic transition. Economically and politically, the world has changed more rapidly in the past few years than at any time since 1945. The emerging global economy is both competitive and interdependent. It reflects the availability of modern communications and production technologies in most parts of the world. So, do we need to be concerned about the future of the English language in the 21st century? According to *The Economist* (1996), English continues to be the world standard language, and there is no major threat to the language or to its global popularity. But, changes are coming.

An International Economy

Two factors drive this global marketplace. First, many manufactured products have one or more foreign components. Ford cars and IBM computers are just two examples of this. Second, more than half of all imports and exports, which governments label foreign trade, are transacted between domestic companies and their foreign affiliates.

The increasing globalization of the marketplace is forcing companies to pay more attention to international developments. Domestic firms are adjusting their structures and methods of operation to fit a broader and rapidly changing economic environment. They are increasing their geographic outreach because more of their suppliers and customers are located on various continents. For example, last year Johnson and Johnson sold more products outside the United States than in the United States. Hewlett Packard, like many companies, lost money when the Asian economy collapsed.

Joint ventures are no longer just theoretical possibilities. Mergers and acquisitions, like Chrysler/Daimler Benz and MCI and British Telecom, increasingly cross national boundaries. This trend is expected to continue into the next millennium.

This internationalization is illustrated in three ways. First, companies change their basic goals to conform to a global marketplace. Second, they adapt their products to local markets. But most importantly, they do not set up international bureaucracies; instead, they hire foreign nationals who understand the local markets.

Why discuss economics with the English language? Because the English language is closely associated with this economic modernization and industrial development.

Information is sent and received at increasing speed. The competitive demands of governments, industries, and corporations, both national and multinational, for technological progress require an understanding of the language of that technology—English.

Spread of English

The global spread of English over the last 40 years is remarkable. It is unprecedented in several ways: by the increasing number of users of the language; by its depth of penetration into societies; by its range of functions.

Worldwide over 1.4 billion people live in countries where English has official status. One out of five of the world's population speaks English with some degree of competence. And by 2000 one in five—over one billion people—will also be learning English. Over 70% of the world's scientists read English. About 85% of the world's mail is written in English. And 90% of all information in the world's electronic retrieval systems is stored in English. By 2010, the number of people who speak English as a second or foreign language will exceed the number of native speakers. This trend will certainly affect the language.

English is used for more purposes than ever before. Vocabularies, grammatical forms, and ways of speaking and writing have emerged influenced by technological and scientific developments, economics and management, literature and entertainment genres. What began some 1,500 years ago as a rude language, originally spoken by obscure Germanic tribes who invaded England, now encompasses the globe.

When Mexican pilots land their airplanes in France, they and the ground controllers use English. When German physicists want to alert the international scientific community to new discoveries, they first publish their findings in English. When Japanese executives conduct business with Scandinavian entrepreneurs, they negotiate in English. When pop singers write their songs, they often use lyrics or phrases in English. When demonstrators want to alert the world to their problems, they display signs in English.

Three factors continue to contribute to this spread of English: English usage in science, technology and commerce; the ability to incorporate vocabulary from other languages; and the acceptability of various English dialects.

In science, English replaced German after World War II. With this technical and scientific dominance came the beginning of overall linguistic dominance, first in Europe and then globally.

Today, the information age has replaced the industrial age and has compressed time and distance. This is transforming world economies from industrial production to information-based goods and services. Ignoring geography and borders, the information revolution is redefining our world. In less than 20 years, information processing, once limited to the printed word, has given way to computers and the Internet. Computer-mediated communication is closing the gap between spoken and written English. It encourages more informal conversational language and a tolerance for diversity and individual style, and has resulted in Internet English replacing the authority of language institutes and practices.

English, like many languages, uses a phonetic alphabet and fairly basic syntax. But most importantly, it has a large and extensive vocabulary, of which about 80% is foreign. Therefore, it has cognates from virtually every language in Europe and has borrowed and continues to borrow

words from Spanish and French, Hebrew and Arabic, Hindi-Urdu and Bengali, Malay and Chinese, as well as languages from West Africa and Polynesia. This language characteristic makes it unique in history.

Finally, no English language central authority guards the purity of the language, therefore, many dialects have developed: American, British, Canadian, Indian, and Australian, to name a few. There is no standard pronunciation. But within this diversity is a unity of grammar and one set of core vocabulary. Thus, each country that speaks the language can inject aspects of its own culture into the usage and vocabulary.

However, the future is unpredictable. As David Crystal (1997) commented, there has never been a language so widely spread or spoken by so many people as English. So, there are no precedents to help us predict what happens to a language when it achieves genuine world status.

Changes in the 21st Century

The world is in transition, and the English language will take new forms. The language and how it is used will change, reflecting patterns of contact with other languages and the changing communication needs of people.

English is divesting itself of its political and cultural connotations as more people realize that English is not the property of only a few countries. Instead, it is a vehicle that is used globally and will lead to more opportunities. It belongs to whoever uses it for whatever purpose or need.

One question that arises about the future role of the English language is whether a single world standard English will develop. This could result in a supranational variety that all people would have to learn.

The widespread use of English as a language of wider communication will continue to exert pressure toward global uniformity. This could result in declining standards, language changes, and the loss of geolinguistic diversity.

On the other hand, because English is the vehicle for international communication and because it forms the basis for constructing cultural identities, many local varieties could instead develop. This trend may lead to fragmentation of the language and threaten the role of English as a lingua franca. However, there have always been major differences between varieties of English.

There is no reason to believe that any one other language will appear within the next 50 years to replace English. However, it is possible that English will not keep its monopoly in the 21st century. Rather, a small number of languages may form an oligopoly—each with a special area of influence. For example, Spanish is rising because of expanding trade and the increase of the Latino population in the United States. This could create a bilingual English-Spanish region.

A language shift, in which individuals change their linguistic allegiances, is another possibility. These shifts are slow and difficult to predict. But within the next 50 years, substantial language shifts could occur as economic development affects more countries.

Because of these shifts in allegiance, more languages may disappear. Those remaining will rapidly get more native speakers. This includes English.

Internal migration and urbanization may restructure areas, thereby creating communities where English becomes the language of interethnic communication—a neutral language.

Universities using English as the medium of instruction will expand and rapidly create a generation of middle-class professionals. Economic development will only increase the middle class, a group that is more likely to learn and use English in jobs.

While languages such as English, German, and French have been international languages because of their governments' political powers, this is less likely to be the case in the 21st century where economics and demographics will have more influence on languages.

Conclusion

English has been an international language for only 50 years. If the pattern follows the previous language trends, we still have about 100 years before a new language dominates the world. However, this does not mean that English is replacing or will replace other languages as many fear. Instead, it may supplement or co-exist with languages by allowing strangers to communicate across linguistic boundaries. It may become one tool that opens windows to the world, unlocks doors to opportunities, and expands our minds to new ideas.

References

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